Washington State Action Plan

Migratory Big Game Initiative



USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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Executive Summary

Across the West, the future of migratory big game is linked to the health of working range and forest lands, that provides seasonal habitats and connected landscapes necessary to keep these iconic herds healthy and resilient. Building on a long-standing history of collaboration, today marks a timely opportunity to further align state and tribal wildlife priorities with the proven strength of USDA. This Framework establishes a strategy that aligns USDA's financial programs with essential technical assistance, outreach, and technology transfer to ensure that state and tribal wildlife priorities are translated into effective, on-the-ground action across all big game habitats. Through strategic coordination of USDA programs, the needs of migratory big game can be supported while delivering benefits to the landowners who steward these landscapes. This integrated partnership strengthens the efficiency and capacity to deliver landscape-scale results for working lands, bolster rural economies, and sustain healthy big game herds for generations to come.

Working Lands: The Engine of Western Life that Supports Migratory Big Game

Productive and resilient working lands are a foundational component of flourishing Western rural economies and contribute significantly to the nation's supply of food and fiber.



Private landowners with sagebrush, grassland, forestlands and wetland habitats provide raw materials to support a diverse and robust working lands economy while also underpinning healthy herds of migratory big game animals. The most productive acreage and the highest quality habitat are not uniformly distributed across any one pasture, ranch, county, or biome. For livestock operations and big game to flourish in these systems, they must have access to ample resources at scales to meet their daily and seasonal needs.

Emerging Threats to Migratory Big Game

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) holds management authority over migratory big game and has identified that migrating species face increasing threats.



The long-term health and resilience of migratory big game in the American West hinges on one thing: maintaining and improving habitat conditions of the vast connected landscapes that these animals depend on for forage and movement. To support these conditions, it is necessary to:

- retain private lands in agricultural, livestock, or forestry operations,
- restore diverse native plant communities by addressing invasive annual grasses as well as the loss of healthy forests and mesic habitats.
- connecting habitat through improved highway and fence crossing, ensuring access to required seasonal ranges for migratory big game.

Purpose of this Framework for Conservation Action

This framework serves to align USDA resources with the Tribal and state-led goals such as those established in the 2024 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) and the USDA (Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and US Forest Service (USFS). This

MOU formalized a partnership to “enhance implementation of voluntary working lands conservation” while ensuring that federal program delivery supports locally-identified priorities.

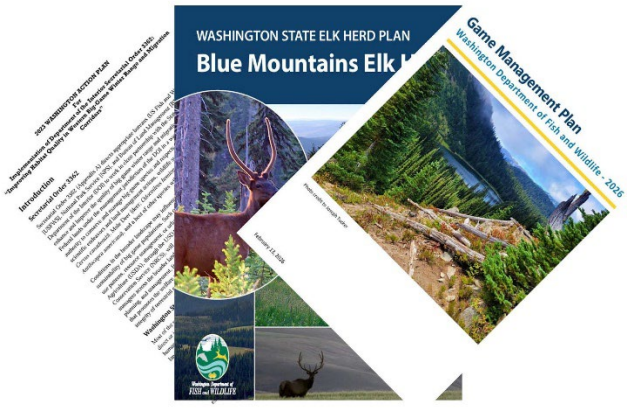
Integrating Tribal and state-collected animal movement data to delineate where to prioritize conservation actions for migrating big game, the USDA can strategically deploy Farm Bill and other USDA resources to maximize beneficial outcomes. This Framework is designed to guide leadership and staff of NRCS and FSA as they consider opportunities to support big game on working lands. Similarly, it also can be used to collaborate with tribes, NGOs, federal, state, and local entities who wish to work in a similar manner with private landowners to solve problems and enhance public resources through a voluntary and incentive-based approach.

Background

State and Tribal Management Authorities

Successful conservation of migratory big game is most effective when federal resources are coordinated with the established management roles of WDFW and Tribal Nations. These entities hold the primary responsibility for managing migratory populations within their respective jurisdictions and provide the foundational data necessary for prioritizing landscape-scale conservation.

WDFW is utilizing State Wildlife Action Plans and species-specific management plans to map migratory herds and identify essential seasonal habitats. Similarly, Tribal Nations exercise authority over wildlife within their reservation and consistent with their treaty rights in ceded areas and traditional areas, offering critical leadership in maintaining cross-boundary connectivity. By aligning USDA’s voluntary, incentive-based programs with the technical knowledge and population goals established by these authorities, this Framework ensures that USDA investments are spatially targeted to provide the highest biological return.



USDA programs and the Working Lands for Wildlife approach

Through USDA programs as well as agency field staff and partners, NRCS and FSA provide the operational support necessary to assist WDFW in achieving their broader conservation goals for migratory big game. As the world's largest source of conservation funding for America's private lands, the Farm Bill provides the essential resources for producers to implement landscape-scale protections and improvements that benefit working lands and migratory big game. By unifying the programmatic strengths of both the NRCS and FSA, producers can more easily navigate the full suite of Farm Bill tools available to enhance the integrity of migratory landscapes.



The following Farm Bill programs have a strong history of supporting producers' conservation goals to improve habitats that support migratory big game. As the conservation landscape evolves, this Framework is designed to be adaptive—continually seeking opportunities to integrate new or emerging USDA authorities that further the goal of maintaining landscape integrity on working lands:

Natural Resources Conservation Service

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): Supports farmers, ranchers and forest landowners in integrating conservation practices, such as wildlife-friendly fencing and forest health improvements, directly into their working lands.
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE): Provides matching funds to partners to purchase permanent conservation

easements on private working lands preventing conversion to noncompatible uses. Partners may include state and local governments, Tribes, and non-governmental organizations that have private farmland, rangeland or grassland protection programs.
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): A partner-driven approach that co-invests in regional solutions to landscape-scale threats across multiple jurisdictions.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): Provides 5-year contracts to support increased conservation practices on an entire property.
- Technical Assistance (TA): Provides professional conservation expertise and management design to all producers, regardless of financial enrollment. This expert guidance is available with no contract required, empowering landowners to strengthen the productivity of their working lands.

Farm Service Agency
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): Provides farmers and ranchers options to support their conservation goals. Signup types and practices include traditional CRP, grassland CRP, CRP SAFE and CREP. CRP provides 10–15-year contracts to landowners for restoring and/or maintaining environmentally important habitat, while protecting soil and water resources.

Multi-Jurisdictional Alignment

The Foundation of Collaborative Stewardship

The conservation of migratory big game is governed by a unique division of responsibility known as the Public Trust Doctrine. Under this framework, wildlife is a Public Trust Resource, and the legal authority to manage these populations rests primarily with WDFW and Tribal Nations.

However, because these public herds spend significant portions of their lifecycle on private lands, their survival depends on the generosity and habitat provided by working farms, ranches, and forests. This Framework does not shift management authority; rather, it aligns federal USDA authorities to serve as the infrastructure that supports state-identified conservation goals. By providing voluntary, incentive-based tools on private lands, the USDA helps states fulfill their trust responsibilities to all citizens.

National Authorities and Primary Drivers

This alignment is formalized through several key policy drivers that ensure federal resources follow the lead of state, tribal, and regional priorities:

2024 USDA-WAFWA Memorandum of Understanding (MOU): This landmark agreement between the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) and the USDA (FSA, NRCS, and USFS) establishes the formal handshake between federal program delivery and

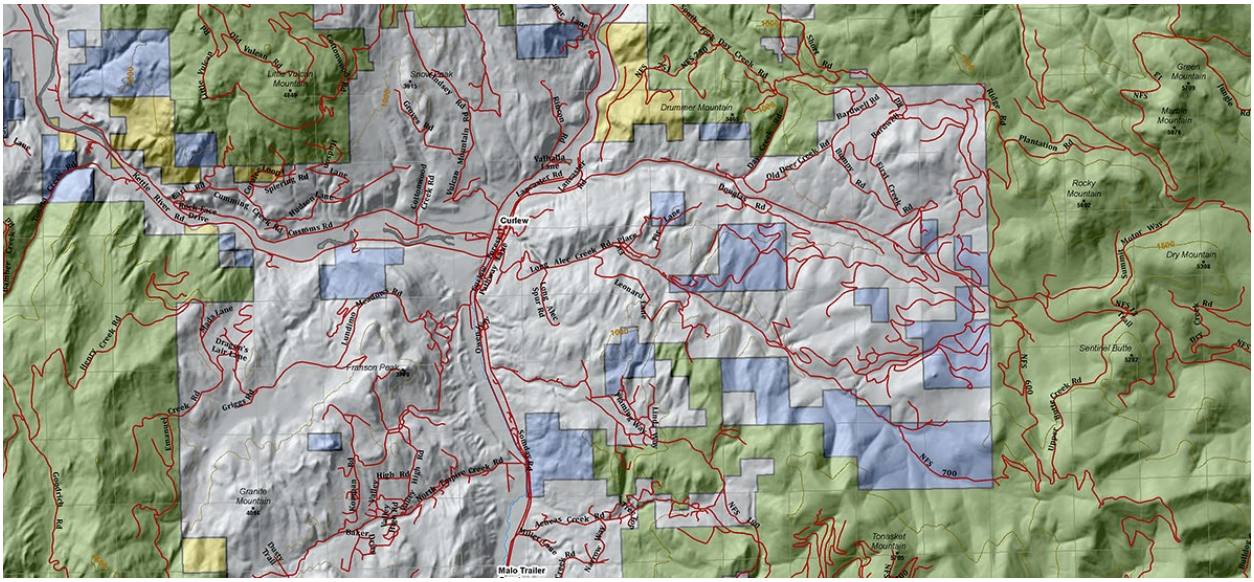
state-led conservation visions. It ensures that Farm Bill investments are directed by the best available, state-collected movement data.

Secretarial Order 3362: This federal mandate directs DOI agencies to work in direct support of states to improve the quality of big game winter range and migration corridors. It recognizes the State Fish and Wildlife agencies as the primary lead in identifying where conservation is most urgently needed.

The Farm Bill: Provides the statutory authority for the FSA and NRCS to provide the financial and technical assistance necessary to maintain the working land habitats that underpin the broad needs of migratory big game.

Coordination and contributions of State and federal entities

Effectiveness of this framework relies on the seamless transition of conservation practices across the checkerboard boundaries that separate private and public lands. While the USDA focuses its voluntary programs on the private working lands that often serve as critical habitats or bottlenecks to movement, these efforts are intentionally designed to complement the management actions of federal land managers. By aligning the timing and location of private land conservation with federal land management actions, geographic saturation necessary to maintain the connected tapestry of habitats supporting migratory big game is achievable.



State wildlife managers and federal program leads review progress, share emerging movement data, and identify upcoming opportunities for cross-boundary projects. This structured coordination ensures that this Framework remains a living strategy that can adapt to new information while maintaining a unified focus on state-identified priority landscapes. Each federal entity provides a distinct contribution to this landscape-scale effort:

- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) manages public state lands for fish and wildlife. WDFW is dedicated to preserving, protecting, and perpetuating the state's fish, wildlife, and ecosystems while providing sustainable fish and wildlife opportunities.
- Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages millions of acres of state forest trust lands. While these working forests generate revenue for public schools and universities, DNR is mandated to protect wildlife habitat, and maintain water quality.
- U.S. Forest Service (USFS) manages the high-elevation national forests that often serve as summer range, ensuring these habitats remain intact and accessible.
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM) typically manages lower-elevation rangelands that often server as winter range, and part of the migration routes between seasonal ranges.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) extends conservation reach through its network of national wildlife refuges and its Partners for Fish and Wildlife private land programs.
- U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) provides science that supports the management of migratory big game across jurisdictional boundaries, including their leadership in facilitating the state- and tribal-led western migration corridor mapping team.
- National Park Service (NPS) manages iconic landscapes that provide seasonal ranges for migratory herds. The agency provides long-term monitoring and research that informs the cross-jurisdictional management of movement corridors and protected areas.

Framework for Conservation Action

This Framework is defined as a unified delivery system that coordinates program implementation, science, technology and communications necessary to scale voluntary conservation. It functions through four areas that empower NRCS and FSA field staff and their partners to achieve landscape-scale outcomes:

- Integrated Program Delivery: FSA and NRCS provide the financial and technical assistance required for landowners to implement on-the-ground practices. By unifying the programmatic strengths of both agencies, the framework ensures that producers have seamless access to the full suite of Farm Bill programs.
- Science: This Framework builds spatial targeting tools, constructs online applications and performs outcome-based evaluations. This function allows the partnership to direct Farm Bill resources toward the specific areas where they will provide the greatest response by migratory big game.
    - Washington Habitat Connectivity Action Plan (WAHCAP): WAHCAP builds on Washington's connectivity science efforts. It brings together decades of research to identify priorities for connectivity projects to protect and reconnect Washington's landscapes for wildlife.
    - Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resilience Initiative (WSRRI): A collaborative focused effort to conserve and restore wildlife habitats, enhance wildfire preparedness and response, and support working lands in Eastern Washington's shrubsteppe landscape.

- Strategic Communications: To achieve meaningful scale, this Framework builds a shared culture of conservation. Key to this function is communicating the outcomes of the work—demonstrating how healthy and connected habitats support resilient working lands, vibrant rural economies, and the long-term sustainability of migratory big game.
- Technology Transfer: This Framework serves as a pipeline for bringing new conservation solutions to the field. Whether it is refining a targeting tool for easement placement or scaling the use of virtual fencing technology, ensuring that the latest innovations are accessible and practical for everyday ranch and farm management is key.

Achieving geographic saturation and scale

To achieve meaningful outcomes for migratory big game, conservation must achieve saturation, where the right practices are applied in the right places at a scale that restores ecological integrity. Maintaining the habitats necessary for a migratory landscape requires a concentrated effort to provide enough coordinated actions—such as fence modifications, invasive annual grass treatments, and land protection—to ensure functional connectivity. By saturating identified priority areas, this strategy moves toward fully maintaining or restoring the ecological potential of the land for wildlife and agriculture.

This level of intentionality is possible by using state- and tribal-identified priorities for both public and private land management. Because these herds navigate complex multi-jurisdictional landscapes, the full return on investment is realized when USDA resources on private lands are complemented alongside conservation actions on public and tribal lands. This approach ensures that migration is resilient across every fence line, landscape, and jurisdictional boundary.

Washington’s Shared threats:

1. Landuse Conversion



Land conversion from agricultural or forested landscapes to residential subdivisions significantly alters the ecological integrity of big game habitat. Agricultural and timber lands provide connected open space, seasonal forage, and predictable travel corridors that species such as deer, elk, and pronghorn rely on for survival. When these areas are fragmented by roads, housing, fences, and human activity, the continuity of habitat is disrupted. This fragmentation forces big game to alter long-established migratory routes, concentrate into smaller areas, or attempt to navigate developed landscapes where risks of vehicle collisions, energy loss, and stress increase. Over time, these disruptions reduce herd health, decrease reproductive success, and limit access to critical winter range and summer forage.

Functional Strategies for Easements or Land Rentals

USDA easements and land-rental strategies can address habitat fragmentation and support big game populations by maintaining open landscapes, agricultural connectivity, and wildlife corridors:

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP – ALE & WRE)
    - Agricultural Land Easements (ALE): Preserve working cropland, rangeland, grassland, pasture, and non-industrial forest land by limiting residential development, thereby maintaining connectivity for migration routes and forage continuity.

    - Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE): Protect, restore, and enhance wetland areas crucial to wildlife and wetland functions—complementary to upland corridors.
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP & Grassland CRP): Long-term contracts (up to 15 years) remove marginal cropland from production under native cover, enhancing seasonal forage and migration routes.

2. Restoring Landscape Connectivity through Fencing Infrastructure



Photo: Alberta Conservation Association

Fencing is a foundational component of Western agricultural operations, yet traditional designs can inadvertently restrict the movement of migratory big game. Maintaining the functional connectivity of the landscape requires a strategic approach to fencing that supports livestock management while providing sufficient passage for migrating herds.

Functional Strategies for Fencing Infrastructure

This framework prioritizes voluntary, incentive-based strategies and solutions to ensure that infrastructure serves both agricultural productivity and wildlife connectivity:

- Modification of Existing Barriers: Adjusting fence height and wire spacing to facilitate easier passage for both adult and juvenile animals. This includes the installation of smooth top and bottom wires at heights that reduce risk of injury and allow safer movement over or under the fence, as well as the use of high-visibility markers in areas where collision risk is high. Migratory gates may also be established in strategic locations in existing fencelines to assist big game animals in migration.


Example of wildlife friendly fence design with smooth bottom wire at 18 in above the ground and a ~40 inch top bar that reduces the chance of big game entanglement and fence destruction. Photo by Eric Van Beek.

- Structural Replacement and Removal: Replacement of obsolete or high-density fencing with wildlife-friendlier fencing. Where redundant or non-functional fences exist, the framework incentivizes their removal to eliminate physical obstructions and restore open migratory pathways.

- Deployment of Virtual Fencing Technology: As a modern alternative to physical barriers, the framework facilitates the adoption of GPS-based virtual fencing. This technology allows producers to manage livestock distribution and grazing patterns through collars, signal towers and satellites. It reduces the need for new internal physical livestock fencing while maintaining the open landscapes required for big game movements.



- Geographic Prioritization: Implementation is directed toward state-identified corridors and seasonal ranges where fencing density poses the greatest challenge to connectivity. By focusing resources on these specific locations, the partnership enhances infrastructure investments that provide the highest return for ranching and wildlife.

3. Restoring Forest or Rangeland Habitats

Within western forested systems, decades of fire suppression have led to overly dense, closed canopy stands that are increasingly vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire. These conditions degrade the summer range essential for migratory big game. When forests become dense, water becomes limited and sunlight is blocked from reaching the forest floor, resulting in the loss of diverse grasses, forbs, and shrubs that provide the high-quality forage needed for replenishing fat reserves and raising young. In addition to restoring these forests for big game, maintaining healthy forests helps protect water resources and rural communities from the rising threat of catastrophic wildfire.

For rangelands, annual grasses or invasive weeds have led rangelands to be less productive, reduced or eliminated shrub/forb component necessary for plant diversity, and increasingly vulnerable for reoccurring wildfires. These conditions have degraded or eliminated valuable winter ranges for migratory big game.

Functional strategies for restoring forest structure, aspen stands, and understory forage

Active management such as thinning dense stands, strategic clear-cuts, and prescribed burns encourages a shift of forests back toward their natural, fire-adapted structures. Biologically diverse aspen stands are rapidly declining due to conifer encroachment, changing water availability, and a lack of disturbance. Further, aspens function as natural fuel breaks due to their relatively high moisture content, making them essential for wildfire resilience. This framework prioritizes practices that facilitate healthy forests, including the removal of encroaching conifers from within and around aspen stands.

- Promoting High-Quality Summer Forage: Strategic Forest management increases water availability and daylights the forest floor, stimulating understory vegetation and timed forage growth that provides the critical nutrition needed by both big game and livestock while on summer range.
- Reducing Wildfire Risk: Strategic forest management reduces fuel loads, promotes a mosaic of age structure stands, and decreases the risk of crown fires through removal of ladder fuels. Collectively, these outcomes reduce the likelihood of catastrophic fires which destroy habitat for decades. Further, managed forests support low-intensity fires or small-scale stand replacing fires that recycle nutrients, create healthy forest mosaics, and produce a more fire-resilient landscape that benefits livestock and rural infrastructure.

Functional strategies for restoring perennial native grasses, forbs and shrubs, and increased rangeland functions

Active management of rangelands to promote higher quality livestock feed and winter forage for migrating big game animals.

- Promoting High-Quality Winter/Spring Forage: Rangeland management with additional supporting conservation practices increases forage availability while providing critical nutrition needed by both big game and livestock while on typical winter/spring range.
- More Resilient Rangelands: Restoring native perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs strengthens long-term rangeland resilience by improving soil stability, increasing water infiltration, and reducing erosion. Native species are well adapted to local conditions and typically outperform non-native vegetation in supporting healthy ecosystem function. Active rangeland management and supporting conservation practices increase both the quality and quantity of forage, benefiting livestock with more nutritious feed and providing big game animals with dependable winter and spring forage during their most demanding seasons. Restored native vegetation also enhances habitat structure, offering better cover, food resources, and ecological connectivity that support wildlife migration and reduce seasonal mortality.

These improvements generate broader ecosystem services, including better soil carbon retention, enhanced water retention and hydrologic function, increased pollinator habitat, and greater drought resilience. As forage availability expands, competition between livestock and big game animals decreases, helping them coexist more sustainably on shared landscapes. Overall, these actions work together to create healthier rangelands, stronger wildlife populations, and more predictable, productive systems for both agriculture and wildlife management.

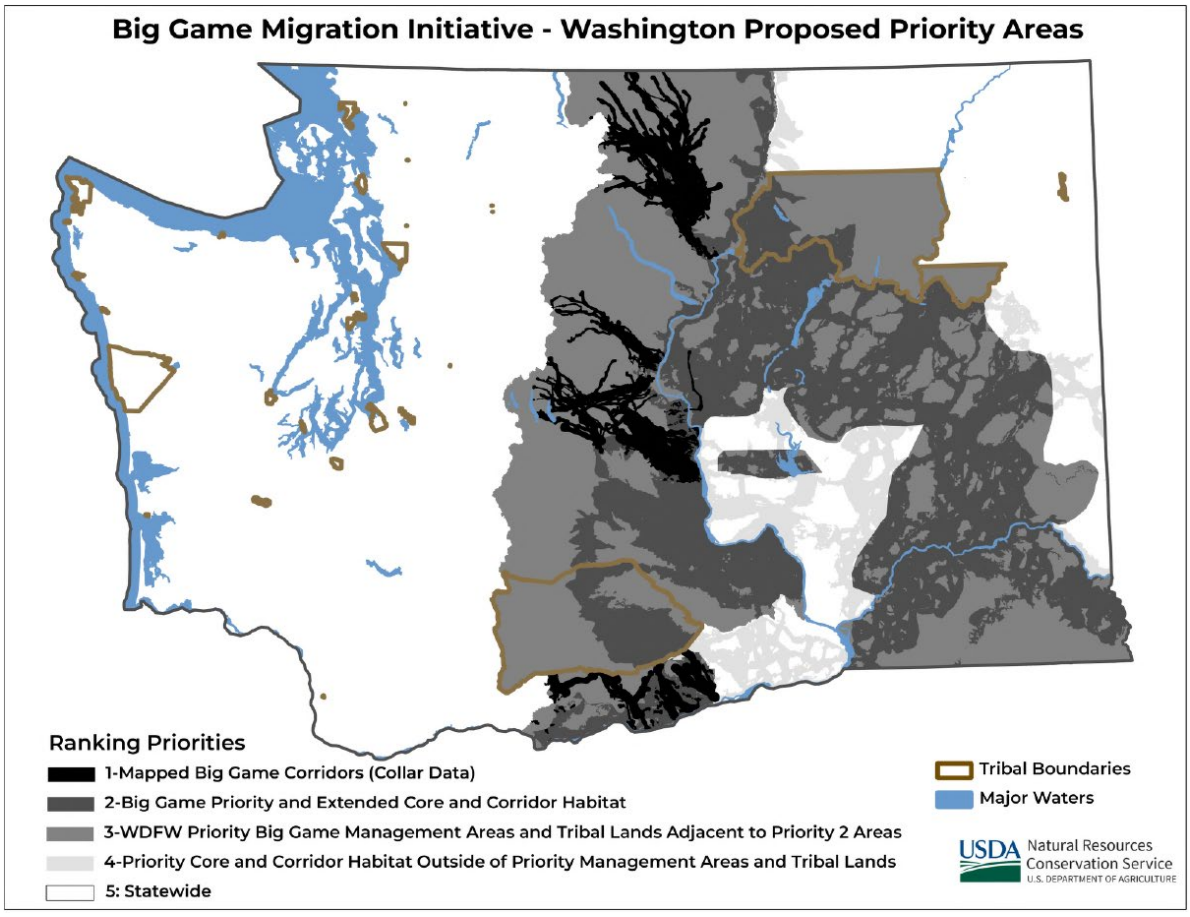
Prioritization of Applications for USDA Funding Sources

The ranking priorities emphasize protecting the most ecologically significant areas for migratory big game by first focusing on mapped migration routes and mapped critical big game habitats, where fragmentation poses the greatest risk to herd health and movement. Next, prioritization centers on key mule deer and elk regions identified through state plans reflecting areas with documented seasonal use and high conservation value. Tribal & State identified priority areas are then elevated to ensure culturally significant landscapes and longstanding stewardship practices are fully integrated. From there, focus expands to lands within shrub-steppe habitat, a sensitive ecosystem vital for forage and connectivity.

Ranking Priorities

1. **Mapped** Migration Routes for Big Game (migratory elk, mule deer, or antelope collared animals)

2. **Mapped** Migratory Big Game habitat of importance within Tribal or State Priority Areas
    I. Tribal identified areas **(yet to be provided for ranking purposes)*
    II. WDFW prioritized habitat within Mule Deer Management Zones
        - East Slope Cascades
        - East Columbia Gorge
        - Columbia Plateau
    III. WDFW prioritized habitat within Elk Management Zones
        - Blue Mountains
        - Colockum
        - Yakima
3. WDFW Priority Big Game Management Areas & Tribal Lands adjacent to Priority 2
4. Priority Core & Corridor Habitat outside Priority Management Areas & Tribal Lands
5. Statewide



Required Conservation Practice Standard (CPS) for NRCS contracting

- CPS 645 Upland Wildlife Habitat Management

Priority Conservation Practices for NRCS contracting

- CPS 160 Prescribed burn plan
- CPS 315 Herbaceous Weed Treatment
- CPS 382 Fence
- CPS 420 Wildlife Habitat Planting
- CPS 500 Obstruction Removal
- CPS 528 Grazing Management
- CPS 595 Pest Management System
- CPS 643 Restoration of Rare or Declining Natural Communities
- CPS 649 Structures for Wildlife
- CPS 660 Tree/Shrub Pruning
- CPS 666 Forest Stand Improvements

Supporting Conservation Practices for NRCS contracting

- CPS 342 Critical Area Planting
- CPS 384 Woody Residue Treatment
- CPS 391 Riparian Forest Buffer
- CPS 472 Access Control
- CPS 490 Tree/Shrub Site Prep
- CPS 516 Livestock Pipeline
- CPS 533 Pumping Plant
- CPS 550 Range Planting
- CPS 561 Heavy Use Area Protection
- CPS 574 Spring Development
- CPS 614 Watering Facility
- CPS 647 Early Successional Habitat Management
- ICPS 828 Wildlife Habitat Site Prep

Anticipated Outcomes: Measuring Progress

While outputs track the physical implementation of practices—counting every acre, foot, and mile completed—this Framework prioritizes an outcomes-based strategy to evaluate the actual impact of these investments. Outcomes answer the "so what?" by measuring the functional benefits of coordinated conservation. By shifting the focus to landscape-scale results, the partnership ensures that USDA and other resources are moving the needle on improving the health and resilience of Washington's big game herds.

The following outcomes are achievable through implementation of this Framework:

Securing Landscape Integrity: Permanent and Term Protection of Agricultural Lands

- Outcome: Long-term preservation of open space, grazing resources, and migratory connectivity.
- Progress: Voluntary Conservation Easements or 10–15 year CRP contracts provide anchors for connected seasonal habitats. These tools protect the integrity of high-value working lands while providing producers with the financial stability to maintain traditional grazing operations across generations. Keeping working lands in working hands.

Restoring Connectivity: Fencing

- Outcome: Improved landscape connectivity and reduced direct mortality, and enhanced ranching operational efficiency.
- Progress: Removing obsolete fencing and adopting wildlife-friendly or virtual alternatives lowers wildlife mortality and movement costs, ensuring big game access to seasonal habitats and improving herd health. For producers, these options cut labor and material costs of repairing fences damaged from wildlife or weather, delivering a clear financial return.

Improving Summer Range: Forest and Aspen Health

- Outcome: Increased quality and quantity of available forage in forested habitats.
- Progress: Forest management, thinning dense forest stands, and removing encroaching conifers from aspen groves allows understory plants to flourish. This stimulates the timing and growth of high-quality forage required to meet high nutritional demands during summer, while simultaneously decreasing wildfire risk to protect water security and rural communities.

Securing High-Quality Habitats: Rangeland Productivity

- Outcome: Enhanced forage availability and livestock management flexibility.
- Progress: Conservation actions that promote intact landscapes—such as invasive species control —simultaneously increase the available forage base for livestock and wildlife. By improving the quality and quantity of forage on the ground, these efforts provide producers with the reliable resources needed to sustain resilient cattle herds and increased wildlife habitat.

Institutionalized State and Tribal Leadership: Strategic Density

- Outcome: A data-driven approach to align federal investment with State and Tribal led priorities.
- Progress: The framework achieves geographic saturation by using state & tribal led biological knowledge and migratory data to drive federal investment. By saturating priority areas across public, private, and Tribal boundaries, this strategy ensures seamless landscape connectivity rather than isolated patches of restoration.